





Ismat Chughtai

A Fearless Voice

*Rupa*  
Charitawali  Series



## CONTENTS



Introduction

### CHAPTER ONE

Travails of an Unwanted Childhood

### CHAPTER TWO

Fire, Fire Burning Bright

### CHAPTER THREE

A Marriage that Almost Never Was

### CHAPTER FOUR

Those who Influenced

### CHAPTER FIVE

Of *Lihaaf* and its Impact

### CHAPTER SIX

Style, Technique, Treatment and Critics

## CHAPTER SEVEN

A Love Affair with Celluloid

Afterword

Her Life in Years



## Introduction

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*"This pen has been both the means of my livelihood and a veritable friend in lone moments. I can call anybody I want on this udan khatola. And when he comes, I can say anything to him, make him cry or laugh or reduce him to ashes. If I so want, I can tear him to pieces and destroy him completely. As with a puppet, I can make him dance to my tune. At such a time I feel some of the power of the creator. Almost everybody, with whom I had any interaction, has left his imprint on my mind."*

She will be referred to as Ismat Apa or only Apa, in this work — respect being one of the fundamental reasons underlying this familiarity. For I have discovered that if justice has to be done to an individual such as Apa, it cannot be done at the level of formality. Deference is best offered — up, close and personally — and in this case, taking into consideration her unique wit, impatience with fools and love for anything remotely resembling life which is, incidentally, vastly different from her sheer zest for living. Her inimitable lifestyle, which could be variously described as being bohemian and free-thinking, lends itself to Apa's individuality.

There is a marked difference between those you remember with awe and those whom you remember from your heart. The former are generally nice, polite souls recalled best with a certain mea-

sure of distance. They are the ones whose greatness is obvious at a glance and overwhelms you. But of those belonging to the latter category, there is a certain warmth that creeps in unbidden — you sit up straighter, your eyes turn bright with memories and your voice takes on a tone and tenor reserved for someone dearly loved and your words spill over each other in a rush to be heard first. But most of all, you remember that person as one of your own.



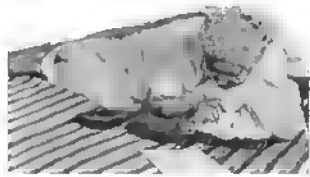
*At the Bhopal Conference, 1949 Ismat apa with Krishan Chander, Josh Malihabadi, Jaan Nissar, Safiya Akhtar, and others*

Not one person interviewed for this biography failed to mention

Apa's large-heartedness, her enthusiasm till the very end and her forthright attitude which has been so faithfully recreated in her stories, autobiography and novels.

Unlike others of her ilk, Apa is nothing if not elusive for the pen that seeks to capture her. She is best understood through her own writings. Though the partially autobiographical *Tehri Lakeer* (A Crooked Line) is considered her masterpiece, her soul resides in the numerous short stories. Stories, churned out of her own experiences and which include real-life characters from within her own circle of family, friends and acquaintances. Her characters leap out of the pages — to shake you, hold you, make you laugh and cry along with them as though they breathe even today. And mere identification with her characters doesn't take away from the fact that you do so, in spite of them being placed in a very specific milieu and time. The identification is at an emotional level.

Yet, despite Apa's formidable reputation in the literary world, there are those who remain ignorant about who she was, even mistaking her for a man! It is to them that this book is addressed. It is an attempt at capturing the essence of a woman who refuses to be contained-either in life or in work!



## CHAPTER ONE

### Travails of an Unwanted Childhood



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*"Somehow childhood passed. I've never understood why people have such praises to sing of childhood. To me it is the name of helplessness and deprivation... I was itching to grow up."*

Ismat Chughtai

Born on August 21, 1911 in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh, Ismat Apa was the ninth child of Khan Bahadur Mirza Qaseem Beg Chagh-

tai and Nusrat Khanam. But, in her own words, Apa was not a welcome child — in parts because she was the ninth of ten children and in parts because she happened to be a girl — a fact that she seemed to detest from as early as she could remember or understand. Even her own mother never let her feel wanted or cared for. Burdened with so many children and other responsibilities Nusrat Khanam had not time for cuddling, cajoling, and pampering or performing even perfunctory motherly duties. Apa was brought up by an *ayah* when she was an infant and then by her older sister, Farhat Khanam. Says Dr. Farhan Mujib, Farhat Khanam's son (currently a professor of Physics in Aligarh University), "The gap between the sisters was so much that my mother practically brought up Ismat Apa. In fact, she herself used to say so."

Her father served as a judicial magistrate at Agra, Bahraich, Jaunpur, Kanpur, Lucknow and later in the princely state of Mewar.

As for her mother, Nusrat Khanam, she was an uneducated, God-fearing lady, who worried more about Apa's soul than anyone else's, for it was only she who chose to tread the more unconventional path in her family. As a girl she was not expected to study or express an opinion. As she mentions at one point in *Kaghazi Haini Pairban*, her incomplete autobiography, "Our family was progressive but this attitude was acceptable only for boys. I was after all just a girl. Every woman in the family — mother, aunt, sister — was terrorised. Society had a fixed station for her. If she overstepped these limits, she would have to pay the price. Too much education was dangerous."

However, for Ismat Apa, this could hardly be termed as deterrent. Not only did she choose to question everything that came along, from early on, she challenged, fought and often won small battles against her older brothers. Whether it was learning to climb guava trees, or riding the family horse. Not for her the womanly

pursuits of learning cooking and stitching. Like she says in *Kaghazi...*, "My sisters were very competent. Apart from Urdu, Persian and the *Quran-e Sharif*, they were well-instructed in embroidery, knitting and cooking. I was a good-for-nothing. I was neither in the habit of stifling my desires, nor had I any interest in such activities."



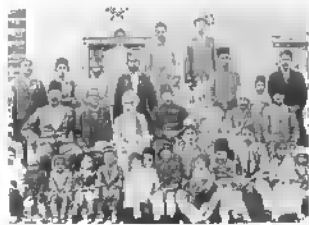
*Birds of a feather: This picture was taken around the time when Apa would have been about 10. Whether she attended this family get-together or is in the picture is a matter of conjecture.*





Since her three sisters were much older, Apa grew up in the company of her brothers. She would follow them in all their activities and even attempt to better them. Being teased for being a girl by her brothers and cousins only fuelled the passion to demonstrate that she was in no way inferior. "My three sisters had already

been married off before I grew up. Even so, being the only girl amongst many boys, I seldom lost out. Whenever I felt that my rights had been infringed I presented my case in my father's court for adjudication... I aped the boys, learnt to climb trees and to race on the bicycle everywhere. At each step, I was made to bite the dust. For instance, each of my brothers took turns riding our horse but as soon as I sat on it, they would start grumbling. When I played *gilli-danda* I would lose miserably. If I insisted on playing football, I got kicked in the face. My brothers always complained about my stubbornness. I was only a headache for them."



The chaghtai clan at Naseem Beg's marriage at the M G Hostel, Jodhpur on November 10, 1927



It was then that one of her older brothers, Azeem Beg Chaghtai (later to become one of the most prominent writers of Urdu fiction) took her under wing. As Apa remembered, Azeem *bhai* had a weak constitution and "therefore was unable to take part in any vigorous physical activity and I was not able to do so being a girl. He told me that boys were bulls so 'why should you become one! Compete with them in studies. That is where you'll defeat them.' Painstakingly, Azeem *bhai* started coaching me and helped me get two double promotions. Another of my other brothers (probably Shameen Beg) who was a year and a-half older to me but was three classes ahead, happened to fail once. So one day we were in the same class and I started helping him with his homework. Then suddenly I knew I had become better than him. Prompted by Azeem *bhai* I read translations of the *Quran*, the newspapers and Muslims history. Sitting amongst *Abba's* friends I aired my new-found knowledge. My mother was taken aback and her impulse was to punish me. However, encouraged by my father

and after spending time in his friends' company... I learnt a great deal."

When she was in Std. IX at the school in Aligarh, Apa's father moved to Sambhar in Rajasthan. She tried her best to persuade her parents to allow her to stay back in a hostel but they did not agree. According to them, staying in a hostel would corrupt her in morals. The sprawling family quarters in Sambhar felt claustrophobic to Apa — almost as though she were in a prison. And then, when she could bear it no longer she braced herself for a showdown with her parents. In *Kaghazi* she vividly describes the scene she had with them and one that would forever change her life.



*Isnat's father, Khan Bahadur Mirza Qaseem Beg Chaghtai*

That morning, as her mother sat cracking betel nut and her father sat in the courtyard reading the newspaper, Apa blurted out her wish to study in Aligarh. Her parents were stunned. Her father stared. She stared right back — something unheard of in the Chaghtai family. No one, let alone his own children, had the courage to look Mirza Qaseem Beg Chaghtai in the eye. It was said that hardened criminals cringed under his glare and began to confess right away. As Apa described the scene in *Kaghazi*,

"I want to go to Aligarh to study," I blurted out and there was no

tremor in my voice.

"You're studying here with your *bade abba*, (Azeem *bhai*)."

"I want to take the matriculation exam."

"What's the use? Jugnu` has just two years of study left... and then..."

"I want to do Matric."

"It's no use (going to Aligarh)."

"Then I'll run away."

"Where will you go?"

"Anywhere."

"Just like that...?"

"Yes, I'll take the tonga to go to the station. I'll get into any coach."

"And then?"

"I'll get down at any station and ask people about the Mission School (in Banna Devi area of the city). Once there I'll become a Christian. Then I can study as much as I want."

While her mother cursed herself and her fate at having given birth to such an evil brat and flung a shoe at Apa to express her disgust, her father was compelled to reconsider his decision, since the choices were rather obviously limited.



Her father deliberated over the matter for about three days, then called her over and handed a bank pass book with six thousand rupees as balance. He gave her fifty rupees to buy her uniform, clothes and books. And informed her that he had got her a flat in Agra and that he was through with his responsibility as far

as she was concerned. This abrupt change in attitude did rattle Apa's confidence and she began to cry, but he assured her that he was with her irrespective of her attitude. That her stubbornness had paid off and she could stay in a hostel was small consolation, but it was a lesson well learnt for both the parties.

This stubborn streak spilled over to anything remotely debatable in school, even something as obscure as larvae in a laboratory! Recalls Sultana Jafri, Apa's childhood friend who later married the renowned poet Ali Sardar Jafri, "She loved to argue. One day in the Botany lab we came across some larvae which she insisted were mosquito's kids. I told her that a mosquito doesn't have kids. But she refused to budge from her stance. She had said the larvae were mosquito's children and that was all there was to the matter. Nothing else would convince her otherwise." Yet, hostel meant a new kind of freedom for Apa, a freedom to mould her life anew. Her energy and grit were inexhaustible. She took active

part in debates that sharpened her wit and taught her to win arguments and gain an advantage over her adversaries.

After school, Ismat Apa moved on to join Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, in 1933 and it was a greatly liberating experience for her. It was a Christian missionary college associated with the Methodist Church of America. Says Jafri, "Since that was an American institution, games like basketball and baseball were part of the curriculum. But sports didn't take Ismat's fancy so much. While I would participate in inter-college matches she excelled in debates. But her English wasn't so strong and she failed in her B.A. (in 1935). She later completed it privately from Aligarh on the advice of Azeem bhai."



*Ismat apa spends time at a beach during her college days*

A small matter of Apa's year of birth needs to be clarified at this point: There is some controversy regarding the year she was born. Throughout, Apa maintained that she was born in

1915, which her critics and translators accepted without scrutiny or demur. But, according to Dr. M. Asaduddin (Head of the Department, English, in Jamia Millia University, Delhi), who has been extensively involved with research on the author and has to his credit three published works on her, "Other evidence conclusively suggests that her year of birth was 1911. One possible reason for this quite uncharacteristic act on her part could be that she wanted to make people believe she was younger to Shahid Lateef, her husband. She was actually older to him by four years."

Older she may have been to Lateef, but when it came to actions, she certainly found herself far more adventurous than him in more ways than one. After all, her childhood stubbornness (which had been carefully cultivated and honed to perfection) had to continue in her college and later life too.

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\* Jugnu was her maternal uncle's son who at the time was studying medicine in Bombay. Apa's family had received a marriage proposal for her and had almost agreed to the match. However, they were also considering Jugnu for their daughter at the same time. Apa roped in Jugnu to help her avoid marrying the deputy collector suggested by her brother Naseem Beg. She wrote to Jugnu in Bombay, and instructed him to write to his own father saying that he wanted to marry Chunni (Apa's pet name). And since he himself was one of the most eligible bachelors in the family, it was very unlikely that her parents would refuse. This is exactly what happened and Apa managed to postpone her marriage indefinitely.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Fire, Fire Burning Bright



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*"I don't imitate the guru blindly. I take my decisions according to my own understanding. And I don't think it irreverence to my guru."*

Ismat Chughtai

thoughts. When she read the Bible, she was scandalised by the fact that it accorded women a secondary status. Her study of history and politics made her aware of the complicity of religion with politics in perpetuating patriarchy. She also studied Charles Darwin whose theory of evolution was a direct assault on Christianity and the Christian and Islamic views of the origin of man. Reading Sigmund Freud disabused her of the romantic notions about love and man-woman relationships. Though she was never entirely convinced of Freudian theories maintaining that "Freud was a Fraud," all this reading and more, did make a deep impression on the young mind and contributed to the artistic sensibility in her adult life.

As she joined Isabella Thoburn College, Apa's mind was bristling with questions, and the books she read only stimulated her





*Ismat apa (extreme right) and her friends*

Apa had too original and independent a mind to accept anything without scrutiny. As she says in *Kaghazi*, "There's something in me that militates against putting faith in anyone uncritically, however great an individual he may be. I would first look for loopholes in his theory. One should examine all points of disagreements before coming to a consensus. I cannot believe in anything suddenly or take it at its face value. I think, the first word articulated by me after birth was — why?"

She greatly admired Rasheeda Jehan (1905-52), for her independent spirit, her fierce individualism and her advocacy of women's emancipation through education. Jehan was a woman of formidable charm, wit, beauty and intelligence. A political and social rebel, Jehan had been known to Apa since her Aligarh days. Apa admired her outspoken senior and desired to emulate her. Jehan entered Lady Hardinge Medical College, in Delhi, in 1924 where she got busy organising literacy classes and free medical

clinics, before she returned to Lucknow as a full-fledged doctor at Lady Dufferin Hospital.

It was in Lucknow, that Jehan along with three other friends published a collection of explosive short stories, *Angaare*. Jehan's *Parde Ke Peechhe* and *Dilli Ki Sair* along with the other stories and essays sought to move away from romanticism to realism in Urdu literature. Predictably, the British government banned *Angaare*.

Apa records the reaction the book received in her college. "There was uproar. And a Mullah Shahid Ahrarvi launched an attack on our college. According to him the girls' college was a whorehouse and should be closed down immediately. He also published obscene caricatures of Rasheeda Apa and the other writers. I had not read the book but Ahrarvi made me want to read it. From somewhere a copy found its way to the hostel through a day

scholar. We lit lanterns, hung quilts over windowpanes and finished reading the book overnight. And we were shaken.

"We looked hard for obscenity and filth and found none. But no one had the guts to say so. A respectable girl saying that *Angaare* wasn't obscene would have been considered shameless. Even though the girls were not as outspoken as me, their thinking was similar to mine. I knew by now that they did not have the courage to say what they thought and wanted to hear me say it. ... Finally a lot of girls decided that the book may be dirty but definitely affected one and contained a lot of truth. I had not read a dirty book before that. But hiding under beds I had heard much dirtier stuff from elderly women. There was something called homosexuality/ lesbianism. What it exactly meant, had not yet become quite clear. A few girls used to comment about some girls. How they were crazy for each other and if one of them so much as spoke to another girl there would be the hell to pay.

But wisdom and politeness demanded that such friendships be ignored.



*Ismat apa seen here with her two daughters Seema (below), and Sabrina and Seema's son Ashish in 1978-79*

"When I read Ahrarvi's article I was incensed and wrote one of my own. It went something like this: 'As it is Muslim girls are

backward and deprived. On top of that, bigots like Ahrarvi have become our enemies. By all means burn the college down, but only our dead bodies will go out from here! Who will come forward to close it down? We'll take them on. Moreover, we have six thousand brothers in the university. Will they sit back quietly and watch while our bodies are being trampled? Whenever we think of Mullah Ahrarvi we remember our brothers, our senior professors and teachers. That gives us courage. As long as they are unharmed no human being can harm a single hair on our heads.... All of us at Girls' College present to the thousands of brothers the rakbi of love and respect along with our best wishes. We hope they will take steps for our protection.' I read out the article, which was long and emotional to the girls. It created a furor. The news reached Papa *mi an*. When he came, he too listened to it. He immediately sent for an envelope and sent it off to the *Aligarh Gazette*. The article was carried the next day. The boys read the article and the same night gave Mullah Ahrarvi

a sound thrashing. His office was destroyed. No one had the courage to defend him. The boys had relatives who studied at Girls' College and were sent thanks through them. The Mullah disappeared after that. For months after that, we remained intoxicated with that victory... For the first time boys and girls had established a pure relationship."

As a matter of fact Apa never tired of expressing her debt to Jehan. Apa considered her not so much a literary influence as a symbol of a certain attitude towards life. "She had shattered all the marble images that I idolised. Life stood before me in its stark nakedness. Even after talking to her for hours one felt the urge for more. Those who have met her know this very well. If

they meet the heroines of my stories, they will feel that they are like twin sisters (Rasheeda *apa* and Ismat's heroines). This is because unconsciously I have lifted her bodily and installed her in the frame of my stories. Only she could have been the heroine of my world of imagination. But when I reflect deeply about my stories, I feel that I could take hold of only her courage and her outspokenness. But her whole mercurial personality has remained beyond my grasp."

Apa strove to learn from every experience that life had to offer — so long as it was on her terms. Be it graduation, the prospect of a job or even marriage.

### CHAPTER THREE

## A Marriage that Almost Never Was



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*"My mother claimed she was very apprehensive about my future. These masculine pursuits (studies and arguments with men) did not behove a girl at all. But I soon learnt why my mother was scared. It was a man's world, she said, made and marred by man. ... Woman was just part of his world — the means for his expression of love and hate. He either worships her or rejects her depending on his mood. Women have"*

After her graduation Apa worked in three different places in UP and Rajasthan. And she realised that real life was very different from the cocooned existence of school and college. Like Prof. Asaduddin points out in his Introduction to *Lifting the Veil, Selected Writings of Ismat Chughtai*: "She came to realise how difficult it was to translate progressive ideals into practice given the imperfect and selfish nature of human beings." In *Kaghazi*, Apa herself acknowledges, "that every human being is a product of his environment. You can't change him by pushing him around."

Her teaching career began in 1937 with the children of Nawab of Jawra, but from there she had to beat a hasty exit. For apart from the onerous task to making young, recalcitrant minds learn, Apa also discovered the occupational hazard of trying to cir-

circumvent the Nawab's plans of making her his daughter-in-law! Apa described the experience thus in a conversation later with Zafar Qureishi Zia, a suitor first and a friend later, "I was lucky to escape the Nawab's benevolence and run away from Jawra. In the last few months of our stay there, the... circumstances had become too unfavourable. The Nawab Sahib had decided to make me and my eleven-year-old niece his daughters-in-law. Nuzhat (Azeem *bhai's* daughter) and I ran away from there the same day and attained our heaven in Bareilly."

Apa then joined as Principal of Islamia Girls' School, Farashi Tola, Gola Mohalla in Bareilly on a salary of Rs. 100 a month. Subsequently, she moved to Rajmahal School in Jodhpur in 1939 and finally shifted base to Bombay in 1941 as an inspector of schools (following the death of Azeem *bhai*, the brother to whom she had been the closest) to join another brother, Mirza Jaseem Beg, who was an engineer.

Soon though, she began having differences with Jaseem over her marriage to Jugnu, her cousin, (to whom she had appealed to rescue her from marrying a deputy collector while she was in Std. IX in Aligarh). Incidentally, the deputy collector turned out to be none other than Zafar Qureishi Zia, whom Apa later grew very fond of and had an affair with, an interesting account of which is found in *Kaghazi* under the chapter *Taaleq*. What Apa proposed, God disposed. She gave in and did tie the knot, but only as she could — in her typical style — as a rebel.



*Early years of Ismat & Shahid: Though marriage is supposed to toll the death-knell of friendship, ours survived with tremendous stubbornness*

She had met Shahid Lateef for the first time in Aligarh. "He was doing his M.A.," she says in *Kaghazi*, "and I was doing my B.T. Then I once had a cursory meeting with him in my heart. After that he came to Bombay and joined Bombay Talkies as

a scriptwriter for the sum of Rs. 225. I met him again when I reached Bombay as a school inspector and started living with my brother. He started visiting our house. I went out with him. We would watch films together, walk barefoot on the beach and meet other literary friends. One time, Shahid took my stories to sell them to Bombay Talkies. Someone told my brother about it and he got very angry. He thought that since his sister earned Rs. 300 a month, she should get married to someone earning at least Rs. 1500 a month. He didn't like my consorting with a scriptwriter who earned a pittance of only Rs. 225 a month." When I saw that my freedom was being restricted, I left his house and started living in a hostel. My brother then started pestering me to get married to Jugnu. 'You are still single. Ask Ismat to marry you. She might say yes,' he told Jugnu. So one day Jugnu came over and we went to Chowpatty. After wandering around for a while, he wavered a bit and then said, '*Bhai* has said that if you want you can marry me.' 'God forbid,' was my first reaction. 'You have

done so much good for me in my life. Why should I take on this enmity with you? The wife I imagine for you in my mind isn't me. She is someone very beautiful, a pure and innocent young girl,' I replied with more sobriety, and we came back home."

As it was, Apa thought it fit to warn Lateef too about his impending fate if he married her. But he was hell bent on it. You see, "it had to do with a bet that he'd taken with his friends. That he would marry her, no matter what. After all, that was the prime reason why he'd moved to Bombay," informs Jafri, tongue firmly in cheek.

Apa takes it from there, "I was just friends with Shahid then. Our marriage owed more to confusion than anything else. Khwaja Ahmed Abbas got us a flat near his house. Mohsin (Abdullah) got hold of a Qazi and so the marriage took place. Before getting married to him, I explained to Shahid that I am a troublesome

woman. That I have broken all the chains in my life and I would never be able to stay bound in them. To be an obedient blameless wife was a role not suited to me. He didn't listen. When we were friends, he'd claimed he would marry me. Everybody would laugh at this. This made his resolve even stronger. One day before the wedding, I warned him for the last time: 'There is still time. Listen to me. We can be friends forever. I am telling you this as a friend.'



*As for Shahid, he kept me wry happy... friendship needs love, not education*

"When my mother found out what her problem child was upto,



she sent my younger brother to Bombay to check out things. My all of six feet three inches tall brother exchanged pleasantries with Shahid, then took me aside and said: 'What are you doing? He is such an innocent looking man. He is going to marry you? Has your mind run away?' He doesn't listen to me. I have told him so. I have tried, now you can also try,' I replied.

"But Shahid didn't listen. My older brother didn't attend the wedding. He didn't see my face until the day he died. As for Shahid, he kept me very happy. ... a man is ready to worship a woman to the extent of making a goddess of her. He loves her. He respects her. But he cannot give her a reason to be his equal. ... But then, friendship needs love, not education. Or does it? Shahid treated me as an equal. Though marriage is supposed to toll the death-knell of friendship, ours survived with great stubbornness. That is why we lived a happy married life."

Ismat and Shahid were married on May 2, 1942. But if accounts given by close friends like Jafri and family members such as Dr. Mujib, her nephew, are anything to go by then by no stretch of imagination was theirs a happy marriage. "Every six months," says Jafri, "they would be threatening each other with divorce in all seriousness. *Batwara kar lo*," they kept telling each other. Something or the other bothered one or the other. Ismat openly acknowledged that she had not married for love, '*mujhe koi ishq nahin hua tha*,' she used to say. She had wanted to rebel and get away from her brother. There were other differences too. She was a famous writer by then and Shahid was still struggling as a scriptwriter and hadn't got so much recognition. Thus, he was also suffering from an inferiority complex. So they were constantly at loggerheads. Besides Ismat didn't have any control over her language. She said whatever came to her mind, whenever. Then there was the obscenity trial in Lahore over her short story *Lihaaf...*"

Though the well-documented incident took place at the beginning of their marriage it left its mark on both, for good. Lateef had never taken kindly to his wife being summoned by the court over obscenity. Of that, in a while... but Dr. Mujib states, "Despite their set of problems Apa never shied away from marriage per se. Her own problems never made her bitter. She is regarded as a feminist, but the real Apa considered marriage a sacred institution, as something wonderful to happen to people. She, in fact, loved my wife and me for being so close to each other. And she loved and respected values such as honesty and loyalty and, education in women." Apa lends credence to this argument in an interview with Afsar Farooqui in *Ismat: Her Life and Times*, "I'm not against marriage as such but against its extraneous ramifications. When we trust each other why can't two people actually have faith and be with each other? If there is no wrangling over *mehr*, they can live together with impunity as long as they like.

In Europe, the institution of marriage is proving a failure, as I understand. It is nothing unusual for the couple to come to blows soon after marriage. It is said that if a woman is capable of taking care of herself there is no need for marriage."

Qualities which would become the touchstone for Apa's future and bear great importance on her relationships in life... be it with her daughters, relatives or friends.



*The creme de la creme! (from left) Sultana Jafri, Ismat apa. Vishwamitter Adil,*

*Ali Sardar Jafri, Krishan Chander, Mahendranath, Muntaz Hussain, Rajender Singh Bedi and (in front) Sahir Ludhianvi and Hoshi Tatvir at Shivaji Park, in 1946*

Ismat Chughtai

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Those who Influenced



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*"In my life, books have had the greatest influence on me. I have received something or the other from every book. I looked for solutions to many of my problems through them, and most often, found my answers there. Books turned out to be my dearest friends and proved to be a relief in sorrow."*

For someone, whose entire being was consumed by a need to communicate and reach out through the Word, it was only befitting that Apa form her foremost impressions from books. The Russian and French masters of fiction — Tolstoy, Gorky, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Maupassant, Balzac and Zola were only some whom she loved to read again and again. While it was Anton Chekhov and other Russian litterateurs who were the, "greatest influence because I encountered them when I was looking around for a guiding spirit," it was George Bernard Shaw in whom Apa found a soulmate — in that his inimitable wit and sense of humour, clarity of thought made brilliant sense to her. Like him, she too loved to shock people and their conventional sensibilities. Recalls Dr. Mujib, "All my friends adored her and landed up at our house when they found out that Apa was visiting. She used to keep everyone in splits. She loved making

provocative statements which would shock people. She would smoke, drink and generally pull everyone's leg. Her imagination could run wild when she began recounting an incident and often it would be peppered with exaggeration. We knew that, but we went along with it because all of us were enjoying it so much."



*Dr. Farhan Mujib, Ismat's nephew, in Delhi, March 2003 at Sabana-Javed Akhtar's house*

In addition, there was "a readiness to take cudgels against all kinds of cant hypocrisy and sham practised in the society in order to make them reflect," says Prof. Asaduddin. It was this attitude of grabbing people's attention that worked marvellously for Apa when she began to write in earnest. And it was Azeem *bhai* who encouraged her, exhorting her to write and convey her thoughts. He had moved on from dry and serious writing to penning stories himself. What he had not been able to do through his serious compositions, he managed to accomplish through his short stories — which were satirical in tone. His heroines were extremely mischievous and interesting individuals. Says Apa at one point in *Kaghazi*, "From him I learnt that if one had to make a point, wrapping it up in stories would attract less flak. More people would read them and they were more effective. I had writ-

ten many articles to which no one had paid any attention. But as soon as I wrote two or three stories, a give and take with the readers began. In addition, as on the telephone, anything could be said in stories, and no hand could reach for my cheek with a slap. Earlier, I had no clue about the response of my readers. I used to write only in *Saqi* (a well-known monthly Urdu journal brought out from Lahore, by Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi) and they threw away all the letters they got in my name."



Apa's first published work was a play — *Fasaadi* written in 1937-38. She also wrote *Gainda* and *Neera* which got published soon after. While short stories remained Apa's forte, she also wrote her autobiography (which she planned to complete but never did), novellas, novels and travelogues. But if there was one genre of writing which she did not explore, it was verse. She could, "remember ordinary things to the last detail. I can also remember conversations, but I just cannot remember verse, though I do remember the content. During poetry competitions in school and college, no team would agree to take me on."

Not that it bothered Apa because there were many other things desirous of her attention — the Progressive Writers' Association, for instance.

Any work on Apa is bound to remain incomplete if a brief mention is not made of the organisation she was involved with since

her undergraduate days. For it was with this bunch of bohemian and candid artists that Apa found a camaraderie that would lend strength to her views. Nor that she was deluding herself with hi-flying notions of the change that the philosophy of these forward-looking individuals could bring about. Firmly grounded as she was in reality, she looked at the entire movement with a certain amount of objectivity. As she mentions in *Kaghazi*, "The group of progressives I got involved with was a bunch of undisciplined revolutionaries. I remember spending very exciting moments in the company of these outspoken, crazy but intelligent people. I have never seriously taken it to be my mission to reform society and eliminate the problems of humanity; but I was greatly influenced by the slogans of the Communist Party as they matched my own independent, unbridled and revolutionary style of thinking."

This motley group often found itself getting together at Apa's

house at Indus Court, near Churchgate in Bombay. Jafri remembers: "All the top Urdu artists had collected in Bombay and used to descend on Ismar's house. *Jumghatt hota tha* and it was an open house for all of us. We were all there most of the time."

The Progressive Writers' Association is best described in the words of Prof. Asaduddin: "The Association was founded in London in 1934, by Sajjad Zaheer (1905-73) and Mulk Raj Anand (1905) with rebellious Indian students from Oxford and Cambridge and some expatriate Indians. The group found fresh impetus after Anand and Zaheer attended the International Congress for the Defence of Culture in Paris which had participants from all over the world who protested against the rise of Fascism in Europe."



*Saadat Hasan Manto*

When Zaheer was returning to India he decided to form the Indian Progressive Writers' Association. The first convention of the Association was held in Lucknow in 1935 which Apa attended. "I participated in the first meeting of the Progressives writers. I remember I saw Munshi Premchand and the writers of *Angare* from a distance. Rasheeda *apa* had taken some of us along to this

meeting. I had not started writing at that time, nor did I have any plans to do so. I hardly understood the proceedings of the meeting. ... Subsequently, Mulk Raj Anand invited me to attend the first meeting of Progressives in Bombay. By then, I had left my job with the education department and had started writing stories for films which Shahid directed.

"In 1945, the association of the Progressive Writers became very close to the Communist Party. Meetings were held, and with great fervour. They were mostly held at (Khwaja) Ahmed Abbas' house or mine. Frankly, I was more interested in those lively and happy-go-lucky people than the revolution. Each of them had launched on a journey in search of a new path away from the traditional road. Their thinking projected the truth of the down-to-earth realities of life. Krishan (Chander), (Rajinder Singh) Bedi, (Saadat Hasan) Manto, Ali Sardar Jafri, Kaifi (Azmi), Majrooh (Sultanpuri), Jaan Nissar (Akhtar), Sahir (Ludhianvi),



Habib Tanvir, (Khwaja) Ahmed Abbas, Akhtar-ul Imam and Mulk Raj had not yet reached the status they have now. I got many a glimpse of brightness in their company. I never took to writing for any particular purpose. But the purpose revealed in the expression of the Progressive Movement was heartily accepted by my conscience. My proximity with the Communist Party brought to me the knowledge of class differences and sectarianism and, for the first time, I realised that the enemy of my happiness was the system."



"My relationship with the Progressives Movement and its writers, poets, and artists has not been just intellectual. I am committed to them emotionally as well. In 1947, when the Partition took place and my family members migrated, the presence of these friends and comrades was a great moral support for me."

Saadat Hasan Manto's relationship with Apa was a little more special in that they had together faced a trial for obscenity in Lahore in 1945. The charges brought against both could not be proved and they were acquitted, but not before Apa had expressed a desire to go to jail. "I've never been to one. Have you brought handcuffs?" she had enthusiastically asked the inspector who had come for her, much to his discomfiture. Best that she recount the incident as she penned it in *Kaghazi*, "It was about four or half-past four in the afternoon when the doorbell rang out loudly. The servant opened the door and then drew back in fear. "Who's there?"



*At the inauguration of a library in Momimpura, Bombay in 1980. Seen with Ismat apa are close friends Sultana jafri and the renowned poet late Kaifi Azmi*

"Police!" Whenever a theft took place in the *mohalla*, all the servants were interrogated.

"Police?" Shahid got up in a huff.

"Yes, sir!"

The servant was shaking with fear. "I haven't done anything, *saab*, I swear by God!"

"What's the matter?" Shahid went up to the door and asked.

"Summons."

"Summons? But... well, where is it?"

"Sorry, I can't give it to you." "Summons for what? For whom?"

"Ismat Chughtai. Please call her." The servant heaved a sigh of relief. "But tell me, ... this..."

"Please call her. The summons is from Lahore."

I had prepared milk for my two-month-old daughter Seema and was waiting for it to cool down. "Summons from Lahore?" I asked as I shook the feeding bottle in cold water.

"Yes, from Lahore." Shahid had lost his cool by then.

Holding the bottle in hand I came out.

"What are the summons about?"

"Read it," said the inspector dryly.

As I read the heading — *Ismat Chughtai vs The Crown* — I broke out into laughter. "Good God, what crime have I committed that the exalted king has brought this lawsuit against me?"

"It's no joke," said the inspector and then, "sign it."



*Old ties: Poet Ali Sardar Jafri and his wife Sultana visit Apa's elder daughter Seema Sawhny in Coonoor in Nov. 1997*

I read through the summons and could barely make any sense of it. My story *Lihaaf* had been accused of obscenity. The Government had brought a suit against me and I had to appear before the Lahore High Court. Otherwise, the Government would penalise me severely.

"Well, I won't take the summons."

"You have to."

"Why?" I began to argue as usual.

"Don't be stubborn," Shahid flared up.

"I won't take it."

"If you don't, you'll be arrested."

"Let them arrest me. I won't take the summons."

"You'll be put in prison."

"In prison? Oh good. I've a great desire to see a jail. I have asked Yusuf umpteen times to take me to a prison but he just smiles. Inspector *sahib*, please take me to jail. Have you brought handcuffs?" I asked him innocently.

Barely restraining his temper the inspector said, "Don't joke. Just sign it."

Shahid railed at me. I was chattering merrily. ..."

Finally Apa did decide that it would be in the interest of all

concerned to simply sign. And sign she did. The summons had been issued in December 1944, and the trial was scheduled for January, 1945. The trial turned out to be more an excuse for visiting Lahore for both Manto and Apa and, the shared experience strengthened the shared bond further.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### OF Libaat and its Impact



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*"A woman also has full right to praise men. And now Krishan Chandra has also told me to write a piece on the beauty of men. And I will do so at the first available opportunity just as thousands of poems talk about the blouses of women, so will I write about men's briefs..."*

Ismat Chughtai

Though she did not come very close to this promise of writing about men's briefs, Apa did make news talking about women under quilts. Her short story, *Lihaaf*, which raised the hackles of many a conservative soul, was probably the first of its genre to raise questions of women who made choices determined by circumstances and not out of free will. Apa had written *Lihaaf* in 1942, while she was still with her brother, Jaseem Beg. The story was sent to *Adab-e-Lateef* where it was picked up for publication immediately. At the same time Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi decided to publish a collection of her stories and picked it up too. Says Apa, "Shahid (Lateef) had not liked the story and we had a fight over it (this, while they were yet to be married)."

The furore, however, that *Lihaaf* would eventually cause was yet to brew fully and the full import of it would be felt for the first

time by the couple when Apa received the summons, a couple of years into the marriage. They also had, had their first child Seema, by then.

*Lihaaf* is a story about a young teenaged girl who is witness to sexual encounters of Begum Jaan and her maid Rabbo. The girl herself becomes an inadvertant victim of the Begum herself when Rabbo leaves for a few days to visit her son. Told from the point of view of the young girl in first person, it also makes a mention of Begum Jaan's homosexual husband, thus explaining why she chooses to find sexual satisfaction elsewhere. The story, written in characteristic Chughtai style, with wry humour and one liners, turned out to be way ahead of its times. This was obvious from the fact that nobody (not even from the Progressive Group) was bold enough to acknowledge the truth in it.



The fact that lesbianism existed, behind closed curtains in the *zenana* (women's quarters) because the men often had other interests — including young boys, and where even the thought of a woman stepping out was unthinkable, had been laid open for discussion. This outraged many, yet, not one of those who had objected could pinpoint the obscene parts in *Lihaaf*.

Though the trial had fallen on its face, *Lihaaf* would remain a story for which Apa would end up constantly defending herself. This was the one story by which she would be measured for the

rest of her career and the one literary piece which she would come close to disowning in course of time. "Unfortunately," she says in *Kaghazi*, "all the correspondence relating to the first story published soon after my marriage, *Lihaaf* was handed over to me because I was considered responsible enough. The tenor of these letters was so terrifying that initially I broke into a sweat. Chastened, I pulled the rein in my pen and, to my knowledge, have never loosened it again. But woe to that environment in which I grew up!"

However she did defend this product of her psyche, "In my stories, I've put down everything with objectivity. Now, if some people find them obscene, let them go to hell. It's my belief that experiences can never be obscene if they are based on authentic realities of life. If these people think that there's nothing wrong if they can do things behind the curtains... they are all halfwits. ... But when I wrote *Lihaaf*, there was a veritable explosion. I was

torn to shreds in the literary arena. Some people also wielded their pens in my support. But, since then I have been branded an obscene writer. No one bothered about what I'd written before or after *Lihaaf*. I was put down as a purveyor of sex. It is only in the last couple of years that the younger generation has recognised that I am a realistic and not an obscene writer.

"The story brought me so much notoriety that I was sick with life. It had become the proverbial stick to beat me with and whatever I wrote afterwards got crushed under its weight. ... *Lihaaf* had made my life miserable. Shahid and I had so many fights over the story that life had become a battlefield.

"(And then), I went to Aligarh after many years. The thought of meeting the Begum who was the subject of my story made my hair stand on end. She had already been told that *Lihaaf* was based on her life. We stood face to face during a dinner. I felt the



ground under my feet receding. She looked at me with big eyes that conveyed excitement and joy. Then she cruised around the crowd, leaped at me and took me in her arms. Drawing me to one side she said, 'Do you know, I have a pearl of a son by God's grace?' I felt like throwing myself into someone's arms and crying my heart out. I couldn't restrain my tears though, in fact, I was laughing loudly. She invited me to a fabulous dinner. I felt fully rewarded when I saw her flower like boy. I felt he was mine as well — a part of my mind, a living product of my brain, an offspring of my pen. And I realised at that moment that flowers can be made to bloom in rocks. The only condition is that one has to water the plant with one's heart's blood."

Along with Apa, Manto too had faced the obscenity trial for his short story *Boo*, which revolves around a young man's memories of a girl from the slums (a *ghatin*), with whom he had spent one night. 'Boo' is the description of her hairy body, her body odour

and how the young man is not able to forget it, even years later. Not even his wife who is far more beautiful and capable, is able to make him forget the one night he spent with the *Ghatin*. Told in graphic detail, stripped of any pretences, *Boo* makes a reader's hair stand on end even today by the power of its telling. It leaves nothing to the imagination and yet cannot be referred to as animalistic or vulgar in tone.

Like Apa, Manto too was acquitted in Lahore, because the charges could not be proved. While Apa found in her the strength to stand and face the world after the *Lihaaf* controversy, Manto was driven virtually insane. Says Apa, "My stories had been branded obscene and my own friends pronounced that Manto and I indulged in sex-related vulgar story-writing. I read and re-read my stories on the basis of these remarks and found these conclusions to be false. But I never felt the need to justify my stories in this regard. Nor did I resent those who raised objections about

my writing. I believe the critic has the right to express his opinion. I picked up from the Progressive Movement all that touched my heart, but I always had faith in my own convictions.



*Saadat Hasan Manto in later years*

"I am fortunate that I have been appreciated in my lifetime. Manto was driven mad to the extent that he became a wreck. The Progressives did not come to his rescue. In my case, they did not

write me off nor did they offer me great accolades. But Manto became a pauper in Pakistan, where he had gone hoping to receive better treatment.

"Independent thinking has always been my nature and still is. All that I have written has been felt from the depth of my heart. I have never consciously indulged in sloganeering. I have never rejected what I wrote once. Never have I written towed by a policy so that what I wrote needed to be altered when the policy changed. Despite my freedom of expression and thinking, I have always felt influenced by communism and will continue to do so.



*Ali Sardar Jafri with Sabrina (left), Seema and wife Sultana in front of Seema's cottage in Coonoor, Oct 1997*

"As for Shahid, apart from the fact that he was my husband I shared another relationship with him, that of a friend. When he got into the mood for friendship, we became really thick. He used

to revise all my stories and novels. Though I never told him, I really valued his opinion. If he ever found fault, he would throw his weight around." And it was constructive critical appraisal such as this, which Apa valued the most... irrespective of its source.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Style, Technique, Treatment and Critics



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*"Ours was a remarkable family, uninhibited and aware, free from falsehood and cant. ... Whatever I felt, I expressed openly. I am talking of the days when I was innocent of reading and writing. In 1935, I met Sajjad Zaheer and Rasheed Aapa, from whom I learnt my first lesson. Their credo was that one should learn to express oneself openly on the basis of one's experience and observation, instead*

*of towing the treaded line out of fear of defying the traditional norms. The culture of landed gentry had made the women suppress their desires, feelings and ideas I have depicted these very women and their psychological contradictions."*

Ismat Chughtai

If anyone thought that *Lihaaf* could cow Apa down to writing tamed stories, they were mistaken. Subsequently, she was to pen stories which were far more mature — the characters more rounded, the language richer in its resonance, the texture more lucid, and she covered wider subjects within her purview — including sensitive ones such as an expose of the power politics and opportunism that prevailed in 70s India such as in *Karsaaz* (The Survivor), and the Partition in *Jarhen* (Roots). A certain personal angst is felt when you read a powerful story like *Jarhen*. And feminist though this may sound, she writes only as a woman could, with her feminine sensibilities.

Unlike, say Saadat Hasan Manto whose treatment of the same subject is clinical in tone and smacks of cold-blooded objectivity. His well-known short story, *Toba Tek Singh* is not only satirical but also laced with back-handed humour highlighting the futility of Partition. Apa for a change forgets her wise ones in *Jarhen* and instead pours herself into the shoes of those who have suffered the pain of separation from loved ones, something that she had experienced first hand, when her family shifted to Pakistan. The only difference between fact and fiction, lies in the fact that most of her family did move, but in *Jarhen* they are cajoled into returning to their home.



However, these stories (especially so *Karsaaz*) are different in that they lack the immediacy of Apa's prose, evident in her other works such as *Chui Mui*, *Do Bachchu Fufi*, *Gharwali* or even *Tehri Lakeer*. Manto allows the reader to think even as they read his prose. You can sense the futility of the situation even while reading it and laugh along with him as in *Tetwal Ka Kutta* or *Shikari Aurtein*. But Apa allows no such concession. In that sense, Manto uses irony as a better narrative device than Apa does. She permits her readers' brain to function only after she has reached the end. That is when you are allowed to mull and ponder and draw

your conclusions.

While Manto stalls and reveals bit by bit, Apa never builds up her plots. Instead, they start in the middle and move back and forth as her thought process leads her. She plunges straight into the action almost as though she is in a rush to get it over with. More often than not, her theme relates to the sexual needs of her character — with the result that her women are either on the verge of being married or are newly wed, and in the bedroom on their first night. Her technique befits the short story genre simply because she wastes no time in introduction or conclusion.

Her descriptions and authorspeak, usually come as a digression in the middle of the story. Almost as though she has meandered into it perchance and now needs to return to where she had begun — be it in *Lihaaf*, *Mughal Bachcha*, *Zaroorat* or *Do Haath*. Invariably, a liet motif too finds its way to bind the story at var-

ious junctures as in *Lihaaf* where the quilt is a metaphor for the going-ons, inside and outside of it.

The mood is necessarily tongue-in-cheek as though she is sitting by her reader and providing constant asides on her characters' lives. The readers are the first protagonists for Ismat Apa — the first characters to whom the plot will be revealed. The characters in her story are the last ones to find out about the action which has already taken place. As a result, when the action is revealed to the character, his or her reaction serves to heighten the interest factor for the reader. But the reader's convenience is seldom taken into consideration. He is usually left to find his way into and out of the maze, without expecting much help from Apa as she happily prattles on about her tale.

Apa wrote strictly for herself, almost as though she was reminiscing on paper and her characters are her most important

narrative device. The movement of the story takes place through them and through their evolution as people. In their surprises, happiness and pain is revealed the mood that the turn the story will eventually take. There may be some merit in Prof. Asaduddin's remark that, "Chughtai uses her mimetic strategy to recreate the entire ethos of a people at a particular moment in history. The certain social environment which shapes their psyche. Removed from their social milieu they lose much of their appeal. ... They are culturally rooted and the local flavour adds significantly to their charms. Thus one while reads the stories, one enters a culture — a culture of the Muslims in UP. Reading a story like *Chauthi Ki Jora* is like experiencing a new culture."



Acclaimed poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ismat Chughtai in Pakistan attending a literary meet

Yet, there is no getting away from the fact that Apa's characters are 'autonomous individuals', with their intrinsic personalities in place. We remember the lilting, impish attitude of Lajjo in *Gharwali*, just as we remember Bi Apa's angst in *Chauthi Ka Jora*, or the woman of innumerable lovers — the precocious Shaman in *Tehri Lakeer* or even say Begum Jaan from *Lihaaf*. They may have been patterned on real aunts, cousins and servants and emerged from a certain social consciousness, which Apa is

acutely observant of, but the real reason why we go back to these stories is not to relive the ethos but because the characters induce us to return.



Jigar Moradabadi, with Ismat apa and Ali Sardar Jafri

Apa rarely makes for academic reading, though she has a loyal following there as well. She became a legend in her own lifetime because she could and does reach out to the common man and identify with his emotions. Her characters — be they sweepers, servants or Nawabs and Mirzas, they move beyond their class to

reach out to the audience without much ado.

The nitty-gritty of plot development is the least of Apa's interests. Indeed, the characters are instrumental in the movement of the story whenever the need arises. Apa is too astute an author to simply use "poetics of fiction... or complicated narrative devices" as Asaduddin says, to describe the passage of time. Her characters evolve with time, and this growth captures her plot movement. For instance, in *Ghariwali*, after the Mirza has married Lajjo and re-christened her Kaneez Fatima, she is expected to behave as a bride belonging to a certain high social class and not as a street urchin which she had been. A mere two sentences make you realise that both — the character and time — have moved. "*Aakhirkaar, bandariya ko sudhaar hi liya... Yeh aur baat hai ki ab mirza ko ghar bhagne ki zyada jaldi nahin hoti thi... moshooq ke naaz uthana aur baat hai, magar biwi ki jootian mard bardaasht nahin karsakta.*" (At long last, the female monkey had



been tamed... another matter that the Mirza did not feel like returning home on time now. Like other husbands, he too sat back with friends so that he was not labelled a hen-pecked husband. It's one thing to indulge the whims of a beloved, another to tolerate one's wife's moods.)

She liked the power that this exercise accorded her. As she once mentioned to Ranavir Rangra in an interview: "I keep my characters under my control. I decided where they have to be taken, and I take them there without allowing them to stray. At that moment, I am God."

Her focus of attention is "the Muslim middle-class household," as Krishan Chander, the celebrated author, points out: "We don't have farmers, labourers, *seths* and *khanbahadurs*. She portrays the frivolity of college girls, along with the daily harangue of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law.... Her stories are written

with such an intensity of expression, that the reader experiences a closeness to the characters and identifies with their pleasures and pains. She tempers reality with incisive observation... and the reader applauds her judicious analysis and laments the bitter reality of her own society.... Ismat has convincingly portrayed the spirit of an urban middle class Muslim household by exploring the fame and fortunes of various persons who are an integral part of the joint family structure."



*Honoured at last: Ismat apa receives the Padmashri Award from then President*

*Fakruddin Ali Ahmed in April 1976*

Patrus Bukhari too corroborates this argument in *Ismat: Her life and Times*: "Ismat's interest lies in individuals and their affairs, their fears and excitement, their animosities and deceptions, in short, all those problems which, when they confront a human being make the body tremble, the blood rush through the veins, the nerves to go taut, and there is a palpable tension in the

Yet, for all her strengths her work has its flaws. In the words of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who has expressed his displeasure over her writings in that there "isn't much variety" in them. He also laments her lack of plot "but the greatest fault in her stories," according to Faiz lies in that "besides being provocative, Ismat has nothing much to say (except in *Lihaaf* or one or two other stories)."

Justifiably, when criticism such as this made its way to Apa's desk, she took her own stance, "I don't pay attention to what others write and I don't bother about what people say. They may be right, so am I. They remain with their experiences, I with mine. I did not bother about any criticisms or objections raised against my attitude then, and I don't bother about them now."

Touche.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### A Love Affair with Celluloid



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*"In all I wrote about fourteen or fifteen film stories, dialogues and scenarios. In fact, there was not much question of serving films. I served myself. One can't make ends meet by writing — for magazines and newspapers. For me, films were just a means of livelihood. I wrote one or two really good stories for films, such as *Sone Ki Chidiya*, *Ziddi* and *Darwaza*. But my films did not take off and that was the end of it."*

If there is one thing to be said for Apa it is this. She may not have been open to criticism from others but she knew where she stood, vis a vis herself. She was shaken after *Lihaaf* but not stirred enough to let go of her convictions and beliefs. She was down but not out for very long. Inevitably, she bounced back stronger than before.

An individual as self-aware, aggressive, and as blessed with the inimitable quality of gab, Apa knew exactly where she stood in the Bombay film industry, despite huge success stories such as M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* based on *Chauthi Ka jora*. Then there were the screenplays of *Sone Ki Chidiya*, which revolved around the life of a successful heroine, starring Nutan with Talat Mehmood and Balraj Sahni and was directed by Shahid Lateef, as also *Ziddi* with Dev Anand and Kamini Kaushal, directed by La-

teef again.



*Balraj Sahni as Salim Mirza in M.S. Sathyu's Garm Hawa and Nutan in Sone Ki Chidiya.*

Once again, it was not as if films had been a natural choice. The interest in the matter owed a lot to a certain Mirza Qaseem Beg Chaghtai who would not allow his children to see the bioscope. And of course, Apa wanted only the forbidden fruit. "For all the broadmindedness of my father, we weren't allowed to see movies. I remember one English film I saw in Aligarh when I was about six — I don't know what it was called — it had Douglas

Fairbanks and Mary Pickford in it. What impressed me most was a kissing scene, because I had never seen a kiss, on screen or otherwise."



*Keshavrao Dale in V. Shantaram's Duniya Na Mane, 1937*

"The next movie I saw was V. Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane*. I was so impressed with its radical, progressive theme revolving around a young girl who is married off to an old man against her wishes. She shuts her door on him on her wedding night and refuses to succumb. Finally he has to relent and let her go. It was films like this which hooked me to the medium."

Eventually, the move to Bombay and her marriage to the budding scriptwriter Lateef, had ensured that Apa would not be far off from the world of cinema. In any case, Apa's stories were already fodder for filmmakers such as Ashok Kumar who picked up her story *Ziddi* to make into a film. But then his mega project *Mahal* diverted him and Apa ended up working on the project herself! "I wrote the script and planned all the indoor sets myself, with bits of other discarded sets lying around the place. I would pick up one window from here, another one from somewhere else. I

would say, I'll make them match. I had read books on filmmaking and had some idea of what was to be done. And there was a very charming camera man at the studio. We became good friends and he agreed to work with me. We took Dev Anand on as a hero for Rs. 6,000. I finished the movie in about seven months time. It was a hit and it ran for several weeks. *Mahal* took years to be complete but when it came out, it was of course a classic."



Ismat apa (extreme left) in *Junoon* along with Shashi Kapoor, Jennifer Kendal and Nafisa Ali

Apa continued to write scripts until the husband-wife team decided to launch their own banner, Filmina in 1950. In all, the couple brought out about twelve films under the banner, including successful ones like Nutan's *Sone Ki Chidiya*. But after Shahid Lateef passed away in 1967, filmmaking took a backseat. And for someone who had written over hundred short stories, novellas, plays, travelogues, story-telling continued to be her mainstay.

As ever, she wasn't content behind the scenes. In fact, she also essayed cameos in films such as the Shashi Kapoor produced *Junoon* (1978) under the Film-vals banner. Directed by Shyam

Benegal, one of the foremost filmmakers of the parallel cinema movement in the 70s, *Junoon* has Apa portraying the role of Javed Khan's (played superbly by Shashi Kapoor) mother.

But Apa's premier interest was writing and she continued to do so as late as 1988, up until she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. It was time for Apa to begin the final battle (only this time it would be for life itself) but death, when it makes a choice waits for none. But it would be another four to five years before Apa would agree to bid adieu to the life she'd loved and lived every minute.

## Afterword

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*"Ismat is thoroughly stubborn. She is by nature rigid, just like a child. She begins with not accepting any rule in life, any natural law. At first she refused to marry. When she was persuaded to it, she refused to be a wife. She gradually reconciled herself to becoming a wife but she did not want to become a mother. She goes through a lot of suffering but she persists in her stubbornness. I believe that this, too, is her way through which, by confronting the reality of life, or in fact, by colliding against it, she tries to understand it... Everything about her is unusual..."*

*"Ismat and I seldom use to talk to each other for fear of clashing. If a story of mine were ever published, she would read it and praise it. She was unusually enthusiastic in her appreciation of Neelam.*

*"Truly, what is this rubbish about adopting a woman as a sister— you are absolutely right. It's an insult to a woman to be called a sister." And I was left thinking — she calls me Mantobhai and I call her Ismat behan. God alone knows why."*

Unlike all the other chapters in this book which have begun with Apa's quotes, this one is different. Not because the book has formally ended with the last chapter but because Ismat Apa needs someone beyond herself to look at herself anew... of course, she would never agree with them. But then what else would you expect? And who better than Manto to begin with, because they were after all, each other's alter egos.

Then there are those who remember her *joie de vivre* like Dr. Mujib, "Aligarh was Apa's extended home. Whenever she visited us, she and my mother would sit for hours together and play cards — rummy, courtpiece, paploo, whatever. In fact, so obsessed were the two of them about cards that they would even forget to eat and drink. I remember one day, both my wife and I had left for work in the morning and we came in the evening to



find the two of them sitting in the same place, still playing cards! A friend of mine was reminded of Sanjeev Kumar and Saeed Jaffery in *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* and that's not an exaggeration really."

Another interesting fact about Apa is that she loved to cook, for all her protests as a child not to. "Not only did she have a big sweet tooth, she simply loved going shopping for vegetables only to come back and make some delicious stuff for all of us. In fact, she would invent recipes and we'd be scapegoats. She was in the least deterred by someone telling her not to do something."

If she did not like being dictated to, she did not dictate either. "I was never stopped from giving my opinion on important matters. In fact, I was treated both by my mother and Nano as an adult," says Ashish Sawhny, her grandson, 32 and ad filmmaker based in Mumbai, who runs his own company called Box Office

Productions. "Nano was always encouraging. If I wanted to learn to cook, she would teach me and she was no mean cook herself. I was lucky in that, she and I would read a lot of plays and books together. She also taught me how to knit! We would go out for films together. She loved the movies and Chaplin was our collective favourite. Later on she got absolutely hooked to television. She would be continually grumbling at the fare that was being dished out but she insisted on watching it. There was no swaying her. On that," he remembers.

Towards the end, when Alzheimer's was sapping Apa's energies away, she became forgetful, "mixed past with the present, her speech turned somewhat incoherent and it was awful to see her go. She suffered for almost five years. Right towards the end, on October 24, around 10 a.m. Apa began choking. Mum and my aunt were with her. She kept talking about returning to Bahraich and expressed a desire to return to Badaun, saying *ghar dekhna*

*hai* (I want to see my home). And that is when you can't help but feel prophetic about it. That maybe the departing souls do have premonitions just before they go," says Ashish. And knowing Apa, she must have known it too.

Apa's daughter, Seema now lives in Coorg (Coonoor) in a tiny, beautiful cottage nestling among tea gardens along with her younger sister, Sabrina who never married. Seema's experience of marriage was a rather sorry one. She married out of choice but her husband Naveen did not turn out to be the ideal man. Troubled by a drinking problem, he often took out his frustration on Seema. And there was only so much that she could have taken. Says Jafri, "She stayed with him for three years but then she came away." Seema began work with ad agencies and subsequently opened her own venture. Ashish was admitted to Champion School, Mumbai, and he subsequently went on to study at Xavier's College. He has since made ad films for many prestigious

clients. Even though he has not made writing his profession, like Apa, he does pen short stories "only for himself."



*Naseeruddin Shah enacting Chui Mui in Delhi, March 2001*

As for Apa, she continues to live on, passed on though she may have to another world.

The internationally acclaimed actor and theatre personality Naseeruddin Shah has re-surrected (read directed) her stories *Gharwali*, *Chui Mui* and *Mughal Bachcha* under the umbrella

name *Ismat Apa ke Naam* for the stage as recently as 2001-2002.

Subsequently, his Mumbai-based theatre group, Motley, also enacted the court trial faced by Apa and Manto in Lahore, as described by Apa herself in the chapter *Un Behataon Ke Naam* from *Kaghazi....* The play entitled *Ismat, Manto Hazir Hain* also featured *Lihaaf* alongside Manto's *Boo* and *Tetwa! Ka Kutta*. Heeba Shah (Naseeruddin Shah's daughter) and Ankur Vikal (portrayed

ably the spirit and energies that Apa and Manto are intrinsically associated with) while Jamil Khan and Randeep Hooda also played key roles.

You see, Apa can never really fade away from public memory so long as the emotions she conjured up in her stories remain a part of the human psyche.

## Her Life in Years

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**1911, August 21:** Born in Badaun, Uttar Pradesh to Nusrat Khanam and Khan Bahadur Mirza Qaseem Beg Chaghtai.

**1916:** Admitted to a Municipal School, at Dhankot, Agra. Soon after, the family moves to Lucknow because her father gets a posting there.

**1921:** Her father retires as Deputy Collector. The family moves to Aligarh. Her brother Azeem Beg and maternal uncle, Ibrahim Beg begin teaching Ismat.

**1922:** Restarts her studies at Aligarh.

**1924:** Begins to write romantic stories mainly culled from the fiction that she has read.

**1928:** Azeem Beg becomes a well-known Urdu fiction writer. Publishes *Quran Aur Purdah* and *Hadees aur Purdah*, both studies of veil in Islam. Apa defies *purdah* in Jodhpur as she gets off the train when she goes there to attend a wedding with the family.

**1929:** The family moves from Aligarh to Sambhar, Rajasthan.

**1931:** The family shifts to Sojat, Rajasthan, where Apa's father was a magistrate.

**1932:** Passes her matriculation examination from Aligarh with a second division.

**1933:** Completes her FA from Aligarh and takes admission in

Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow for her B.A.

**1935:** Fails the B.A. examination. Azeem *bhai* is appointed Chief Justice at Javare.

**1936:** On Azeem *bhai's* advice, Apa agrees to complete her graduation privately. Her father dies at Jodhpur on December 3.

**1937:** Begins her career as a teacher. Appointed Principal at Javare. In July, appointed Principal of Islamia Girls Schools in Bareilly. In October, she writes *Bachpan*, her first essay about her childhood experiences. Its publication is refused by Maulvi Mumtaz Ali of Lahore.

**1938:** Apa's second work, *Fasaadi*, a play was the first to get published in *Saqi*, a renowned Urdu journal, edited by Shahid Ahmed Dehlavi. This is quickly followed by short stories, *Gainda*

and *Neera*.

**1939:** Leaves her job at Bareilly and registers for BT at Aligarh Muslim University. After finishing BT, she starts teaching at Rajmahal School, Jodhpur.

**1941:** Is at Jodhpur when Mirza Azeem Beg Chaghtai, the brother closest to her, passes away on August 20. Apa leaves Jodhpur on November 11, 1941 for Bombay to join her engineer brother, Mirza Jaseem Beg Chaghtai. She is now Inspector of Schools in Bombay.

**1942:** Marries Shahid Lateef. Writes *Lihaaf*, which gets published in *Adab-e-Lateef*.

**1944:** Her first daughter Seema is born in October, in Bombay. December, Apa is served summons for *Lihaaf*.

**1945:** In January leaves for Lahore with Saadat Hasan Manto to appear before the court for the trial.

**1948:** Apa's first novella, *Ziddi* (written in 1939) is made into a film starring Dev Anand and Kamini Kaushal.

**1950:** Shahid Lateef and Apa begin work together as a producer-director team and start their own film company, Filmina. The first film from this banner is *Aarzoo*. The film flops at the box-office, but Dilip Kumar finds himself labelled as *Sbabensbab-e-Jazbat*.

**1952:** Sabrina, the couple's second daughter is born at 3, Indus Court, the house where Apa lived till the very end. The family has since shifted from there.

**1958:** *SoneKi Chidiya*, starring Nutan, Balraj Sahni and Talat

Mehmood is the seventh film to come from Filmina and is a hit. Nutan would later describe the film as being one of her best.

**1961:** Writes *ChauthiKajora*, which would later (in 1973) be made into *Garm Hawa*, starring Balraj Sahni and directed by M.S. Sathyu.

**1967:** Nusrat Khanam, Apa's mother passes away in Aligarh on April 13-

**1968:** Seema marries a Punjabi Hindu, Naveen Sawhny, on August 14, in Bangalore.

**1969:** Ashish, Apa's grandson is born on July 4.

**1973:** *Garm Hawa* is released and Apa receives the President's Award for Best Film Story.

**1974:** Seema and her son Ashish move to Bombay and begin living with Apa.

**1976:** Receives the Padmashri which is conferred upon her by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed on April 3-

**1977:** Receives Ghalib Samman (Award) from the Ghalib Institute for her Urdu play, *Tanhai Ka Zahr*.

**1978:** Acts in Shyam Benegal's *Junoon*, produced by Shashi Kapoor.

**1979:** *Junoon* is released. Receives the Makhdoom Literary Award of Andhra Pradesh Urdu Akademi.

**1988:** Is diagnosed as suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

**1989:** The Iqbal Samman is conferred on her.

**1990:** In February, visits Bhopal to receive the Iqbal Samman, along with a reward of Rs. One lakh.

**1991, October 24:** Ismat Apa passes away in Bombay. Dharamvir Bharati, Surender Singh Nautiyal and Vishwanath Sachdeva accompany her body to the crematorium. Seema honours her mother's wish to be cremated.

**1992:** *Aakhri Kahani* is published by Biswin Sadi. And *Ismat Chughtai ke Sau Afsane (One hundred Stories by Ismat Chughtai)* is published from Lahore.

**Note:** Only Ismat Apa wrote her name as Chughtai, the rest of the family continues to use Chaghtai as the official surname.

HER MAJOR FILM PROJECTS		
FILM	YEAR	STARRING
Ziddi	1941	Dev Anand & Kamini Kaushal
Kidaro	1941	Philip Kumar & Kamini Kaushal
Uss-e-Sai	1942	Sajjan & Nazim
Faizab	1943	Kashim Kumar & Musammit
Woh Hai Chudayi	1948	Talish Schimmi & Nazim
Ganga Rovers	1973	Usha Singh & Usha Singh
Juveni	1979	Shashi Kapoor & Jemima Jones

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**Bachpan** 1937 (first work but wasn't published until later)

**Dheet** (her only soliloquy) 1938

**Kafir** 1938

**Gainda** 1938

**Neera** 1939

**Uske Khwab** 1940

**Bin Bulaye Mehmaan** 1940

**Kaliyan** (first collection of short stories) 1941

**Lihaaf** 1942

**Chotein** (collection of short stories with a preface by Krishan Chander) 1942

**Collection of stories, articles and travelogues** 1946

**Chui Mui** (A collection of 14 essays, reportage and stories)



1952

**Nanhe Ki Nani** 1954

**Muttee Maalish** 1956

**Chauthi Ka Joda** 1961

**Zahr Ka Pyala** 1965

**Do Haath** (collection of stories) 1966

**Nivala** 1968

**Mughal Bachcha** 1976

**Teesra Haath** 1980

**Peni** 1983

**Muqaddas Farz** 1983

**Jo Amman Mili To Kahan Mili** 1984

**Kanya Daan** 1985

**Sundersi** 1986

**Mokha** 1987

**Aakhri Kahani** 1992 (published in *Biswin Sadi* after Apa's death)

#### PLAYS

**Fasaadi** 1938

**Collection of Six Radio Plays 1955**

**Intikhab 1939**

**Dhani Bakeln 1945**

**Dozakh 1960**

**Tanhai Ka Zahr 1977**

#### **NOVELLAS**

**Ziddi 1939**

**Dil Ki Duniya 1962**

**Teen Anaari 1964**

**Ajeeb Aadmi 1968**

**Baandi 1971**

**Jungli Kabootar 1971**

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**Tehri Lakeer 1945**

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